

How the Public Can Help Disaster Victims



Natural and man-made disasters result in tragic loss of life and cause extensive damage every year. After a disaster has struck, people everywhere want to help those in need. Following two major disasters, Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and the midwest floods of 1993, citizens throughout the nation mobilized to offer assistance to the victims.

However, despite the public's best intentions, donated goods that are unsolicited or inappropriate frequently cause more harm than good. Unnecessary and unmanageable items can compete with essential relief goods for the limited capacity of personnel and operating facilities, and in turn, delay the delivery of necessary provisions to those most urgently in need.

This need not be the case. By following specified guidelines, timely donations will arrive at the scene of a disaster in an orderly way and will help rather than hinder the recovery and rebuilding process.

*I want to help. What should I do first?

Find out the needs of the disaster victims and respond properly. Immediately following a disaster, local disaster relief officials will determine the needs of their community. These officials will then provide the media and various disaster relief organizations with a needs list. Look for reports from the media or a recognized volunteer agency experienced in disaster response such as your chapter of the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, Adventists Community Services or Catholic Charities Chapter before you take any action.

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*What do disaster victims need most?

Money. Financial contributions are the most useful form of disaster assistance. They help guarantee that relief workers have the funds necessary to provide disaster victims with needed supplies in a timely fashion. Donating money also eliminates many

of the logistical concerns such as transportation, distribution and spoilage frequently associated with donations of unsolicited, unsized clothing and perishable mixed food items. Money also helps the local economy recover.

Financial contributions should be made through a recognized volunteer agency to help insure that donations are put to their intended use. These organizations can accept checks or credit card donations earmarked for the disaster region. In addition, these organizations can provide telephone numbers of relief agencies in the disaster area.



***Do disaster victims need clothing?**

For the most part, the answer is "no." Unless specifically asked for, donations of clothing are generally discouraged. Clothing and shoes are usually not needed after a disaster. Immediately after a disaster has occurred, there is neither the time nor distribution channels to ensure that donated items don't go to waste.

If clothing is requested, new clothes are preferred. Used clothing should be cleaned and in good condition. All articles should be sorted by category: age, gender and type. Donors should also consider the local climate when choosing what to send.

***Can I send food to the disaster area?**

Unless specifically asked for, donations of food are also discouraged. In most disasters, food scarcity is not an immediate problem. If food is requested, baby food is needed first, then ready-to-eat, non-perishable food items. It is also important that donated food be clearly labeled to facilitate distribution.

***What about medicine?**

The arrival of unnecessary medicines at a disaster scene can be a burden rather than an asset. Medical supplies are highly specialized commodities that must have a distribution channel of qualified personnel. If medical supplies are called for, medicines sent must have a shelf life of at least six months after arriving at the disaster site, and they must also be clearly labeled. Old prescription medications should never be sent.

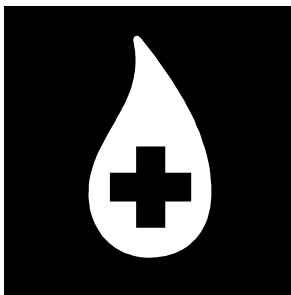
***Can I go directly to the disaster scene and volunteer to help?**

Although well-intentioned, volunteers who have not been specifically requested at a disaster site frequently just add to the existing chaos. If you want to go to the disaster scene, first call either the American Red Cross or the Salvation Army for information (Note: the American Red Cross conducts a basic training program for volunteers and usually only sends volunteers that have completed adequate training.). Local emergency services directors can also be contacted about volunteering for disaster relief efforts.

***How can businesses and organizations help?**

Businesses and organizations wishing to make donations should first contact local officials to find out what is needed. Once the needs have been determined, it is helpful for the business or organization to choose a single type of item to donate. This facilitates organization and distribution at the disaster site. The donors should also be prepared to provide for the transportation of the goods and arrange for the delivery and unloading of the supplies at a specified location. Loading and unloading is much more efficient when shipments are transported on portable platforms that can be transferred using a standard forklift.

Also, businesses and organizations can conduct fund-raising efforts in their community with the proceeds going to the disaster area. Following the midwest floods in 1993, several radio stations and church groups conducted fund-raising efforts such as garage sales to raise money for the victims.



***What about donating blood?**

Blood is always needed following a major disaster. Contact your local American Red Cross chapter or a local hospital for information on how you can donate blood for disaster victims.